Dropout Rate Has Fallen, Census Bureau Reports

By Tom Mirga

WASHINGTON—The annual high-school dropout rate nationwide fell significantly in the decade between 1973 and 1983, with the rate for black males showing the greatest decline, the Bureau of the Census reported last week.

The study represents the bureau's first attempt to calculate the yearly dropout rate.

According to the bureau, 535,000 persons ages 14 to 24—5.2 percent of the total age group—dropped out from either the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade between 1982 and 1983. In 1973, 683,000 persons dropped out of those grades, a rate of 6.3 percent for the age group.

The yearly dropout rate for black males fell from 12 percent to 7 percent during the period, representing the only statistically significant change among the subgroups studied, according to the bureau's report.

Robert Kominski, the bureau analyst who prepared the report, said dropout rates for Hispanic students could not be calculated because too few were included in the sample.

The report indicated that students who dropped out in 1983 may have stayed in school longer than did dropouts 10 years earlier. Overall, the dropout rates declined in grades 10 and 11—from 5.4 percent to 3.7 percent in grade 10 and from 6.5 percent to 4.5 percent in grade 11. They showed little change in grade 12, rising slightly from 7.1 percent to 7.5 percent.

Three-Year Rate

The bureau said the combined three-year dropout rate for all students in grades 10 through 12 was 15 percent in 1983, compared with 19 percent in 1973. In other words, for every 100 students entering the 10th grade in 1981, 15 did not complete high school by the end of school year 1983.

The bureau estimated that the combined three-year rate for black males fell from about 32 percent in 1973 to about 20 percent in 1983. The three-year rate for white males fell slightly during the 10-year period, from 17 percent to 15 percent.

The report also indicates that only a fraction of a percent of all students drop out before reaching high school. About 112,000 14- to 24-year-olds in 1983 dropped out before reaching 9th grade, or about 0.28 percent of the total. The pre-9th-grade dropout rate for black students was 0.48 percent, compared with 0.21 percent for white students.

Method Used

Mr. Kominski said the bureau computed the dropout rate for 1983 by asking the survey's respondents whether they were currently enrolled in school and whether they were enrolled in school the year before.

Previous efforts to calculate national dropout statistics have been hampered because school districts' and states' methods for reporting student attrition vary widely. The Council of Chief State School Officers has been working to encourage states to adopt a standard definition of a "dropout." (*See Education Week, Nov. 19, 1986.*)

The bureau's report also notes that earlier studies of the national dropout rate by the U.S. Education Department's center for statistics measured the ratio of high-school graduates to all persons 17 years old. "This measure is lacking" for several reasons, it notes, including the fact that "many persons older than age 17 are still enrolled in high school." Just over 20 percent of all persons 18 and older were still enrolled in high school in 1983, it notes.

The bureau's report, "School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1983," Series P-20, No. 413, also includes data on preprimary and college enrollments. Copies can be obtained by writing to the U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

Annual High-School Dropout Rates, by Race, Sex, and Grade: October 1973 and 1983

Race, sex, and grade	1983 High-school students	1983 Number of dropouts	1983 Rate	1973 High-school students	1973 Number of dropouts	1973 Rate
	(numbers in thousands)					
White	8,528	409	4.8	9,357	536	5.7
Male	4,264	232	5.4	4,708	288	6.1
Female	4,264	177	4.2	4,649	248	5.3
Black	1,487	103	6.9	1,375	139	10.1
Male	687	48	7.0	650	78	12.0
Female	800	55	6.8	725	61	8.4
Grade 10	3,468	129	3.7	3,899	210	5.4
Grade 11	3,601	162	4.5	3,631	237	6.5
Grade 12	3,262	244	7.5	3,321	236	7.1
Total	**10,331**	**535**	**5.2**	**10,851**	**683**	**6.3**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Student-Aid Cuts Have Hurt Blacks, Study Finds

By Robert Rothman

WASHINGTON—Cutbacks in federal grants to college students have disproportionately harmed students in historically black private institutions, and may have caused the recent reduction in the college-going rate among blacks, according to a study released here last week.

"This study looks at the very kind of student that the federal financial-aid system is most designed to help, and finds that the system is failing them," said Christopher Edley, president of the United Negro College Fund, which prepared the report with the National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities.

"We're spoiling the educational dreams of an entire generation of black youths," Mr. Edley said.

The study found that between 1979-80 and 1984-85, the purchasing power of Pell Grants, which go to low-income students, fell by 37.3 percent. That reduction, it found, had the severest impact on the 62,000 students at the nation's 57 private historically black colleges, who constitute 6 percent of the total black undergraduate enrollment.

Students at black private colleges, according to the study, tend to be poorer, more dependent on federal assistance, and less likely to receive institutional or state aid than private-college students in general.

As a result of the declining value of federal grants, it concluded, the students in black private colleges reported a 10-fold increase in their reliance on loans to finance tuitions during this decade.

The study was unable to prove that this trend had contributed to the nationwide reduction in the proportion of blacks attending college. But officials from the sponsoring groups said lower enrollments are a likely result of reduced aid.

"These students are really on the front lines," said Julianne Still Thrift, senior vice president of NHCU. "For them, aid is a clear necessity. If it is pulled back, they have nowhere else to go."

Moreover, she said, the increasingly heavy debt burden may discourage those who do enroll from pursuing careers requiring the added cost of an advanced degree.

'False, Malicious'

The report, "Access to College: The Impact of Federal Financial Aid Policies at Private Historically Black Colleges," comes at a time when policymakers and federal officials are questioning whether students in general are relying too heavily on loans to pay for their college educations.

A report issued in January by the Congressional Joint Economic Committee found that the total amount of student debt in loans from government sources has tripled—to $9.8 billion—in the past decade. The report asked: "Are we overburdening a generation?"

At the same time, the Congress is debating the Reagan Administration's fiscal 1988 budget, which would cut spending on grants and unsubsidized loans, while allowing students to borrow higher amounts at market rates and to repay loans on the basis of their post-graduation income.

Bruce M. Carnes, the Education Department's deputy undersecretary for planning, budget, and evaluation, called the new report "false, pathetic, and malicious." The shift from grants to loans is fair, he said, because college graduates earn, on average, $650,000 more over their lifetimes than people without college degrees.

"Some people would have you believe college students are the single most disadvantaged group of people in the United States," Mr. Carnes said in an interview. "I don't think that's factually accurate."

Going to college "is something they choose to do," he continued. "They are not drafted to go into the mouth of a live volcano. If people elect to do this, even if they have to borrow money, I don't see any unfairness in that."

Aid Sources

The new study found that students in historically black private colleges have, during the past five years, sharply increased their reliance on loans to finance college costs. The proportion of student-aid recipients in those colleges who were dependent on loans rose from 4 percent in 1979-80 to 46 percent in 1984-85, the study found.

The students turned to loans, it found, because other sources of aid were unavailable. Their families were generally unable to pay their tuitions, the report says, noting that the students studied came from relatively large families, averaging 4.6 members, and that more than a third of them had at least one other sibling in college.

Moreover, the study found, the median family income of the aid recipients studied was $10,733 in 1983-84, approximately one-third of the median income for all families with children in college.

The colleges themselves were also limited in the amount of financial assistance they could provide, the study found. Endowments at historically black private institutions average 50 percent of those at other private colleges, it found.

In addition, the report notes, because average tuitions at the black institutions are lower than those at other private colleges, the black schools have less income to use for scholarships.

Tuition at Paine College in Georgia, for example, is about half the amount necessary to meet costs, according to its president, William Harris.

"If I were to take a wholly business approach, rather than increase

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